

Major Developments and Activities

The period under review follows one of the most tempestuous centuries in human history and the dawn of a new millennium. Thousands of volumes have recounted in detail the litany of ordeals and sorrows endured by the world's peoples during the twentieth century. Yet, despite the enormity of the ruin that the human race brought upon itself during those years—the consequences of which continue to reverberate through the tumultuous present—the profound vision offered by Bahá'u'lláh offers an altogether more optimistic view of humanity and its future.

We are living today on the cusp of a great societal shift. The upheavals of the last century may, perhaps, be likened to the stage of adolescence in an individual's life—that transitional period when the thoughts, attitudes, and

habits of childhood are gradually discarded to make way for new patterns of thinking and action. In 2013, the Universal House of Justice observed:

Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race.... Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.¹

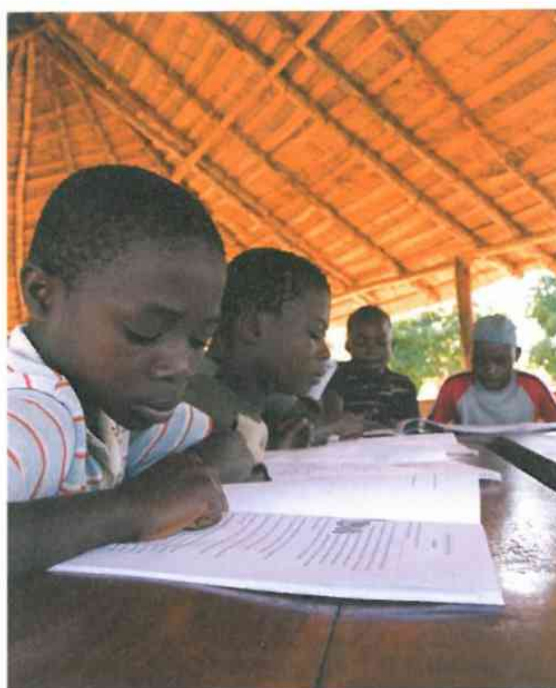
The hallmark of this approaching age of maturity is the unification of the human race and the emergence of a global civilization that honors all, while deriving benefit from the unique cultural and religious heritage each brings to the whole.

Over the last 150 years or so, a new pattern of life based upon the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh has, almost imperceptibly, taken root in every part of the planet. The extraordinary geographical spread and numerical growth of the Bahá'í Faith has been documented fully in every volume of *The Bahá'í World* since it was first published in 1926. In tandem with this remarkable and largely unknown story of sacrificial, pioneering efforts on the part of a small number of dedicated souls emerged the wider acceptance that humankind constitutes one people—an incontrovertible truth proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh that was once viewed with skepticism. Every successive calamity and challenge faced by the peoples of the world seems to reinforce the recognition of humanity's essential oneness.

This realization, however, is not merely a recognition of our interdependence, nor a desire for tolerance or increased cooperation among people and nations. Rather, it calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. To this end, throughout the world and often in the most unassuming of settings, followers of Bahá'u'lláh, alongside their families and friends, neighbors, and colleagues, have been striving together to establish a pattern of activity as

well as the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of oneness and the convictions underpinning it, and to advance the realization of the unity of the human race and lasting peace and prosperity in the world. As the Universal House of Justice has observed:

Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part.²



A group of junior youth in Mwinilunga, Zambia, learning about spiritual empowerment

or her talents and abilities. Justice demands universal participation.³

The challenge was, and remains, primarily educational. A process was required that allowed people to explore spiritual concepts and develop their capacity for applying them to their own social reality. Regardless of age, race, gender, or creed, every person could draw insights from both science and the world's spiritual heritage to contribute to the generation of new knowledge.

At the request of the Universal House of Justice, a network of training institutes was established throughout the world, focused on raising up increasing numbers of individuals who possess the knowledge, habits, attitudes, qualities, and skills to serve their

communities and build a new model of society. The transformation of the individual would contribute to the development of communities, which, in turn, would provide the environment for further individual and societal progress. Certain "core activities" were identified as a natural response to the needs of most populations: gatherings for training in "study circles," moral and spiritual education for children, devotional gatherings, and a program for 12- to 15-year-old "junior youth" stood out as being of central importance. When woven together with related activities, the dynamics generated began to give rise to a vibrant pattern of community life. As a result, what emerged were the glimmerings of a change in the culture of a commu-



A devotional gathering marking the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb in 2019 at the site of the future national Bahá'í House of Worship in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

nity, one where conversations on the purpose of life and the betterment of the world proliferate, and where individuals support and accompany one another in developing the capacity for service to society. In 2008, the House of Justice described the panorama that was unfolding throughout the world:

Thousands upon thousands, embracing the diversity of the entire human family, are engaged in systematic study of the Creative Word in an environment that is at once serious and uplifting. As they strive to apply through a process of action, reflection and consultation the insights thus gained, they see their capacity to serve the Cause rise to new levels. Responding to the inmost longing of every heart to commune with its Maker, they carry out acts of collective worship in diverse settings, uniting with others in prayer, awakening spiritual susceptibilities, and shaping a pattern of life distinguished for its devotional character. As they call on one another in their homes and pay visits to families, friends and acquaintances, they enter into purposeful discussion on themes of spiritual import, deepen their knowledge of the Faith, share Bahá'u'lláh's message, and welcome increasing numbers to join them in a mighty spiritual enterprise. Aware of the aspirations of the children of the world and their need for spiritual education, they extend their efforts widely to involve ever-growing contingents of participants in classes

that become centres of attraction for the young and strengthen the roots of the Faith in society. They assist junior youth to navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and to become empowered to direct their energies toward the advancement of civilization. And with the advantage of a greater abundance of human resources, an increasing number of them are able to express their faith through a rising tide of endeavours that address the needs of humanity in both their spiritual and material dimensions.⁴

To make the work of community building more manageable, it became practical to consider strategies within the context of "clusters"—smaller geographic territories within every country, defined by their distinct social and economic features. The ability to prepare simple plans at the cluster level began to be cultivated and, from such plans, programs for growth arose, pursued over three-month cycles of activity.

By reflecting upon and further refining its processes and actions over two decades, the Bahá'í community has now been able to incorporate the overarching lessons it has learned into its educational materials. Thus, the knowledge generated in myriad diverse urban and rural settings can be shared and applied in other locations around the world, tailored to the particular characteristics and circumstances of each place.

A PERIOD OF SPECIAL POTENCY

The final Five Year Plan (2016–2021) of the 25-year series took place within a period of many historically significant occasions—a span of time described by the Universal House of Justice as a “period of special potency.” Its inaugural year witnessed the centenary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writing of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, a series of letters to Bahá’ís in North America in which He mapped out a charter for the global spread of the Bahá’í Faith, as well as the guiding principles and spiritual requisites for achieving it.

The bicentenary of the Birth of Bahá’u’lláh was commemorated in tens of thousands of localities across the planet in October 2017. The House of Justice reported that in “settings of all kinds, from homes to stadiums, His life was celebrated with the utmost devotion and remarkable creativity.”⁵ As a consequence, the Bahá’í community “experienced an unprecedented surge in its capacity to bring friends and acquaintances into contact with its community life; to inspire neighbourhoods and villages into unified endeavour; to articulate how spiritual truths can be translated into sustained practical action; and, above all, to converse not only about the teachings that will build the world anew, but about the One Who taught them: Bahá’u’lláh.”⁶

Two years later, the bicentenary of the Birth of the Báb further galvanized Bahá’í communities the world

over and, in a number of countries, resulted in a dawning awareness of the existence of the Bahá’í Faith, its teachings and pursuits. “We were much encouraged by the capacity shown to bring the broadest possible spectrum of people into the embrace of the community’s activities,” noted the House of Justice:

Surely, this illustrates how moments sacred in human history and commemorated at Holy Days have immense power to uplift individual souls and to weld a people together through shared experience. What great promise for advances at the level of culture lies in the universal celebration of such Festivals in place after place in the years to come!⁷

Several highly creative feature films were commissioned to mark these anniversaries and were screened extensively in localities and at national events around the world and, in some countries, broadcast on television. *Light to the World* (2017) recounted the story of Bahá’u’lláh’s singular life and the impact of His teachings on communities across the globe.⁸ *Dawn of the Light* (2019) followed the personal search for truth and meaning undertaken by eight individuals from different continents.⁹ Their stories were explored against the backdrop of the remarkable mission of the Báb, the forerunner of Bahá’u’lláh.



Students at a Center of Learning established by CORDE, a Bahá'í-inspired educational organization in Battambang, Cambodia

THE EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTH

In 2013, the Universal House of Justice called for 114 youth conferences to be held throughout the world, to encourage young Bahá'ís and their friends to resist the enervating materialism and negative peer-pressure around them and commit themselves wholeheartedly to the community-building processes underway, particularly the training of junior youth:

You, however, are aware of your part in a mighty, transforming process that will yield, in time, a global civilization reflecting the oneness of humankind. You

know well that the habits of mind and spirit that you are nurturing in yourselves and others will endure, influencing decisions of consequence that relate to marriage, family, study, work, even where to live. Consciousness of this broad context helps to shatter the distorting looking glass in which everyday tests, difficulties, setbacks, and misunderstandings can seem insurmountable. And in the struggles that are common to each individual's spiritual growth, the will required to make progress is more easily summoned when one's energies are being channelled towards a higher goal—the more so when one belongs to a community that is united in that goal.¹⁰

A series of short films, titled *To Serve Humanity*, captured the insights and conversations among conference participants as they explored those themes that are central to the process of community building.”

SOCIAL ACTION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE DISCOURSES OF SOCIETY

Toward the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Bahá’í community’s involvement in the life of society became the focus of more direct attention, conceived of as two interconnected areas of endeavor: social action and participation in the prevalent discourses of society. The increase in human resources and direct experience of service to society—resulting from the community-building work and educational processes—had served to raise the capacity of participants to bring the wisdom enshrined in Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation to bear upon the challenges of the day.

By way of illustration: When, in 1983, the Office of Social and Economic Development was established at the Bahá’í World Centre, its initial task was to assist a few hundred Bahá’í activities in social and economic development around the world. By 2018, these projects numbered in the tens of thousands, “including hundreds of sustained projects such as schools and scores of development organizations.”¹² The House of Justice observed:

The broad range of current activities spans efforts from villages and neighborhoods to regions and nations, addressing an array of challenges, including education from preschool to university, literacy, health, the environment, support for refugees, advancement of women, empowerment of junior youth, elimination of racial prejudice, agriculture, local economies, and village development.”¹³

The creation of the Bahá’í International Development Organization was announced by the Universal House of Justice on 9 November 2018. Like the Office of Social and Economic Development before it, its primary purpose was “to facilitate learning about development by fostering and supporting action, reflection on action, study, consultation, the gathering and systematization of experience, conceptualization, and training—all carried out in the light of the Teachings of the Faith.”¹⁴



Bahá’í representatives at an interreligious discourse on the environment meet HRH The Duke of Edinburgh and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon at Windsor Castle, November 2009.

Bahá'í participation in the discourses of society also increased during these years. Such activity ranges from an individual offering a perspective from the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in an everyday conversation with a colleague or a neighbor, to the increasingly sophisticated contributions of the Bahá'í International Community, which also opened new offices in Addis Ababa, Brussels, and Jakarta.

The period also witnessed a vastly augmented, greatly fortified network of national Offices of External Affairs, for whom participation in discourses became the principal focus. Established Associations for Bahá'í Studies began to reimagine their activities as a means to foster further the intellectual life of the community, raising the capacity of individuals and groups of friends to bring insights enshrined in the Bahá'í sacred writings to bear on conversations and their participation in discourses. And the Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, in the United States, made significant strides in its mandate to advance an interdisciplinary examination of, and discourse on, global peace.

THE BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

Since 1963, the election of the Universal House of Justice—the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í Faith—has been held every five years. The House of Justice is elected by the members of all National Spiritual



In March 2008, at the National Bahá'í Convention in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, for the first time since the unification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, Bahá'ís elected the country's National Spiritual Assembly.

Assemblies at the International Bahá'í Convention, held in the Holy Land. There were three International Conventions in the period under review—in 2008, 2013, and 2018.

The global spread of the Bahá'í Faith has been reflected in the increase in the number of National Spiritual Assemblies. While there were 56 National Assemblies in the world that first elected the House of Justice in 1963, 173 took part in the 2018 election. The large number of indigenous peoples who made up the membership of National Assemblies—particularly on the most recent occasion—was evidence of the further penetration of the Bahá'í Faith into countless diverse societies. Between 2006 and 2020, National Assemblies were reformed in Afghanistan, Burundi, the Caroline Islands, Egypt, Liberia, and Vietnam.



A special children's program was part of the February 2009 Frankfurt conference that welcomed more than 4,600 participants to the European Bahá'í House of Worship in Langenhain, Germany.

The capacity of National Spiritual Assemblies to manage the affairs of their communities increasingly benefited from new heights of collaboration with the members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, a group of 90 men and women spread throughout the world tasked with nurturing and advising communities and Spiritual Assemblies to devise systematic plans of action and learn from their experience. The Counsellors have taken the leading role in systematizing the gathering of insights from the grassroots and ensuring they are widely disseminated.

Regional Bahá'í Councils, now present in 230 regions of the world, emerged as a fully fledged institution

of the Bahá'í Faith during this period. Councils, and the training institutes they oversee, have proven themselves indispensable for advancing the process of community building.

BAHÁ'Í HOUSES OF WORSHIP

Efforts to raise up Bahá'í Houses of Worship visibly accelerated during the last 15 years. Dedicated to joining the worship of God with service to humanity, there are now eight regional or continental Houses of Worship open to all people and collectively receiving millions of visitors each year. In October 2016, the final continental

House of Worship was inaugurated in Santiago, Chile.

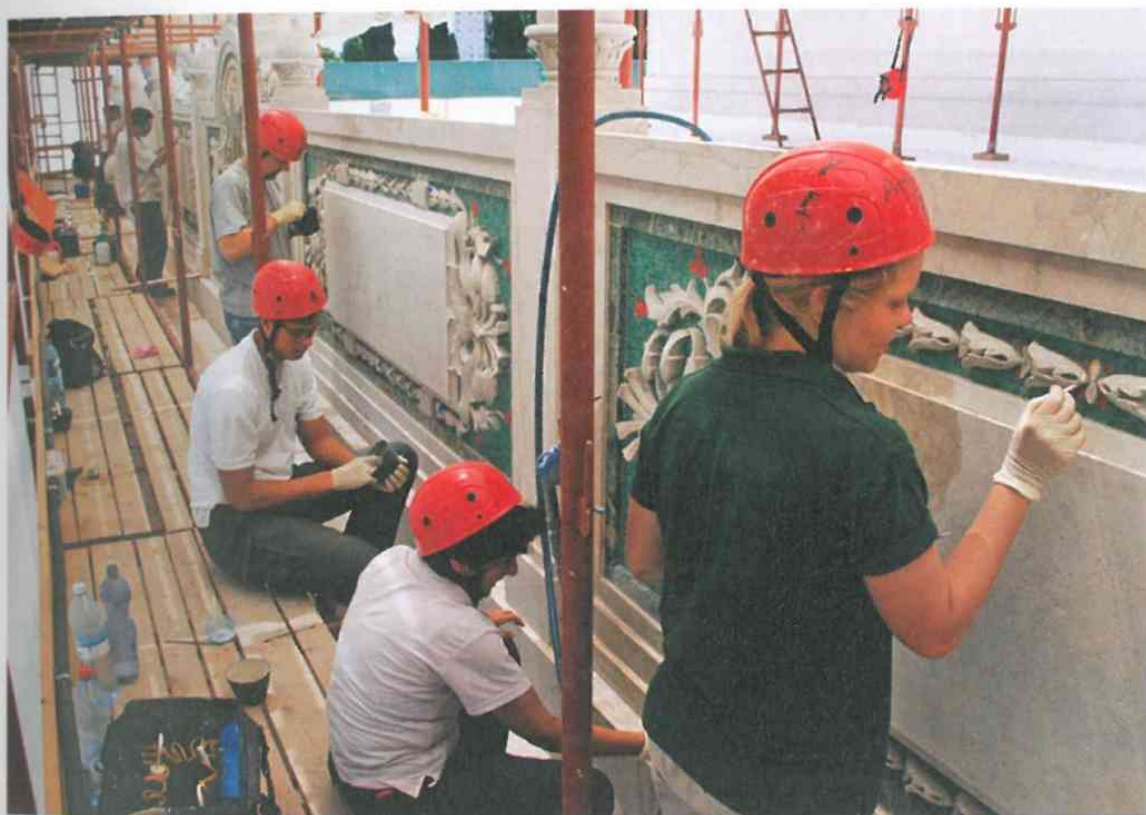
In 2012, the Universal House of Justice announced plans for the first national Bahá'í Houses of Worship in Papua New Guinea and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Work also commenced on local Houses of Worship in clusters where "Bahá'í communities have significantly grown in size and vitality, and where engagement in social action is apparent."¹⁵ The local House of Worship in Battambang, Cambodia, opened in September 2017, and the Temple in Norte del Cauca, Colombia, in July 2018. Under construction are local Houses of Worship in Matunda Soy, Kenya; Tanna, Vanuatu; and Bihar Sharif, India.

Bahá'í Temples, whether newly dedicated or long established, are increasingly occupying a position at the heart of community life. In time, each of them will be surrounded by other structures dedicated to serving the needs of the community, such as schools and universities.

DEVELOPMENTS AT THE BAHÁ'Í WORLD CENTRE

Among the many developments at the Bahá'í World Centre were a host of projects to strengthen and preserve the precious Holy Places of the Faith.

In July 2008, the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and the Shrine of the Báb were



At the Shrine of the Báb, volunteers carried out meticulous stone restoration work, completed in April 2011.

recognized as UNESCO World Heritage sites—places of inestimable significance for humanity. The Bahá'í Shrines were the first sites connected with a religion born in modern times to be added to the list. The public flocked to visit these sacred locations by the hundreds of thousands—and in some years in numbers approaching one and a half million—and the Bahá'í World Centre regularly welcomed hundreds of pilgrims at once, sometimes more than 5,000 in a year, along with a similar number of Bahá'ís making brief visits.

In April 2019, the Universal House of Justice announced that work would begin on the construction of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in the vicinity of the Ridván Garden near 'Akká (Acre), on a crescent traced between the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh near 'Akká and the Shrine of the Báb in Haifa. The land that would support the central structure

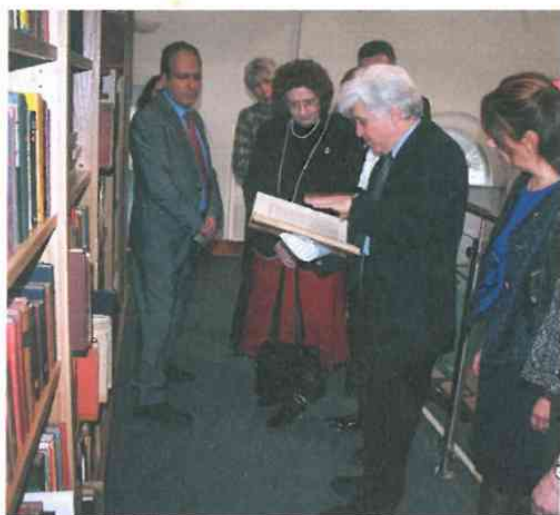
and the surrounding gardens was prepared, and work soon commenced on the foundations of this unique structure that, it is envisaged, will “honour 'Abdu'l-Bahá's unique position” and “reflect at once His lofty station and His humility.”¹⁶

INTELLECTUAL LIFE AND LITERATURE

“Intellect,” 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, “is, in truth, the most precious gift bestowed upon man by the Divine Bounty. Man alone, among created beings, has this wonderful power.”¹⁷ Intrinsically, every educational endeavor of the Bahá'í community has at its heart the development of the intellectual capacity of participants from their earliest age. But attention has also been paid to the Bahá'í community's ability to bring insights from the Bahá'í sacred writings to bear on relevant discourses within the wider society.

In a 2013 letter, the Universal House of Justice considered the contribution that the Association for Bahá'í Studies—first established in North America in 1975—could make to the burgeoning opportunities in this area:

Every believer has the opportunity to examine the forces operating in society and introduce relevant aspects of the teachings within the discourses prevalent in whatever social space he or she is present. It is, perhaps, as a means to enhance the abilities of the friends to explore such opportunities in relation



The Afnan Library, an extensive collection of Bahá'í books and related literature based in Sandy, England, opened to researchers in February 2015.



Since 2010, students in Kazakhstan have attended annual Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity seminars, which help them relate their education to efforts to contribute to the transformation of society.

to their scholarly interests that the endeavours of the Association for Bahá'í Studies can be conceived. Through the specialized settings it creates, the Association can promote learning among a wide range of believers across a wide range of disciplines.¹⁸

As a consequence of this new direction, the work of a number of Associations for Bahá'í Studies began to be re-imagined, with the establishment of various consultative groups that would provide opportunities for people to explore the deeper questions and concerns in their fields in light of spiritual principles, seeking new insights into the needs of humanity at this time.

In 2007, the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) initiated

a line of action focused on raising capacity in university students and young adults to participate constructively in the discourses of society and to contribute to the betterment of humanity at higher levels of sophistication and effectiveness. ISGP now conducts a series of seminars for university students as well as graduate seminars, serving thousands of young adults from more than 100 countries.

Complementary to all the various aspects of the intellectual and spiritual development of the Bahá'í community over the past 15 years has been an increase in access to literature. The translation, publication, and dissemination of the Bahá'í sacred texts accelerated in parallel with the development of the online Bahá'í Reference Library, which



University students in Zambia collaborate on an exercise at an ISGP undergraduate seminar.

allows newly translated works to be released online when they become available. More than 100 items—including selections from the works of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in English translations and Persian originals—were made available in September 2018, followed by 67 selections from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in May 2019, including His two well-known and historic Tablets to The Hague, written in the aftermath of World War I to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace in The Hague.

Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ("The Most Holy Book"), was newly translated into a number of languages, including Norwegian (2008), Cebuano (Philippines, 2018), and Ice-

landic (2021). New selections of the Bahá'í writings were also made available for the first time in Armenian, Greek, Hindi and 13 other languages spoken in the Indian subcontinent, Kazakh, Kurdish (both Kurmanji and Sorani), Mongolian, Nepali, Tetum, and Tshiluba, to name but a few.

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh appeared in its first Korean edition (2012), and in New Zealand, Bahá'í prayers were collected into a volume in the Māori language (2018).

Scores of new books were published in a multitude of languages, adding to the ever-growing body of Bahá'í literature on topics ranging from explorations of Bahá'í perspectives on subjects including law, justice, the

equality of women and men, race unity, peace, and agriculture, to scholarly studies of aspects of history and inspirational biographies of early Bahá'ís, to attractive picture books introducing spiritual concepts and qualities to the very young.

Throughout the past 15 years, political upheaval and economic turmoil on various continents have shaken governments and peoples. "Where the aspirations of the people have gone unfulfilled, a store of indignation has

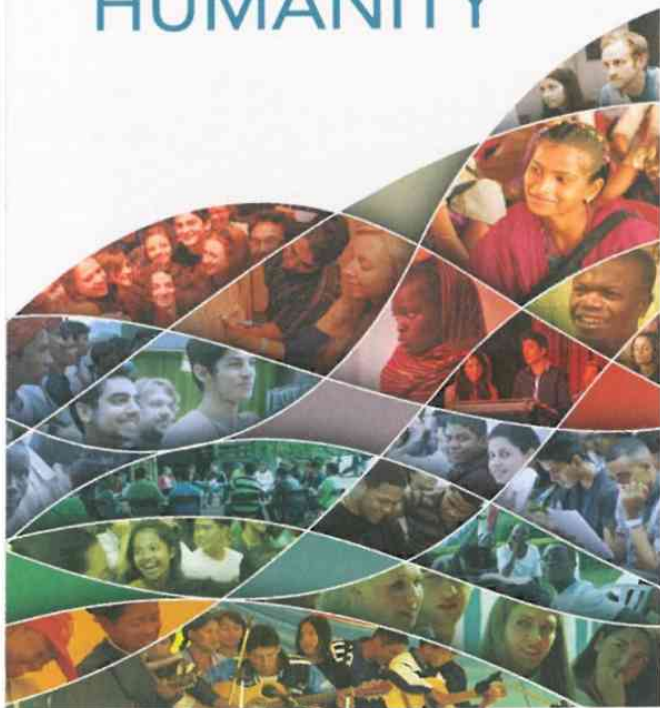
accrued,"¹⁹ observed the Universal House of Justice in 2011. "An attentive observer of the times will readily recognize the accelerated disintegration, fitful but relentless, of a world order lamentably defective."²⁰ That world order, Bahá'u'lláh predicted, would soon "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead."²¹

In its efforts to play its part in the building of a global civilization rooted in the principle of the oneness of humanity, the worldwide Bahá'í community has rapidly gained strength over the past quarter of a century and is ready to take great strides forward.



During the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Bahá'ís in India distributed food and other necessities to their fellow citizens in need.

TO SERVE HUMANITY



A series of short films, *To Serve Humanity*, captured the insights and conversations of participants at the 114 youth conferences held around the world in 2013.

COMMUNITY BUILDING ON FILM

To share insights from Bahá'í community-building efforts around the world, a number of films were produced between 2009 and 2021.

Following 41 regional conferences held over a period of four months in 2008 and 2009—which attracted the participation of more than 40,000 Bahá'ís and their friends from some 170 countries—*Arising to Serve* was released as an inspirational record of those gatherings. The film captures moments as participants met to share what they had learned in their activities, to plan for the work ahead, and

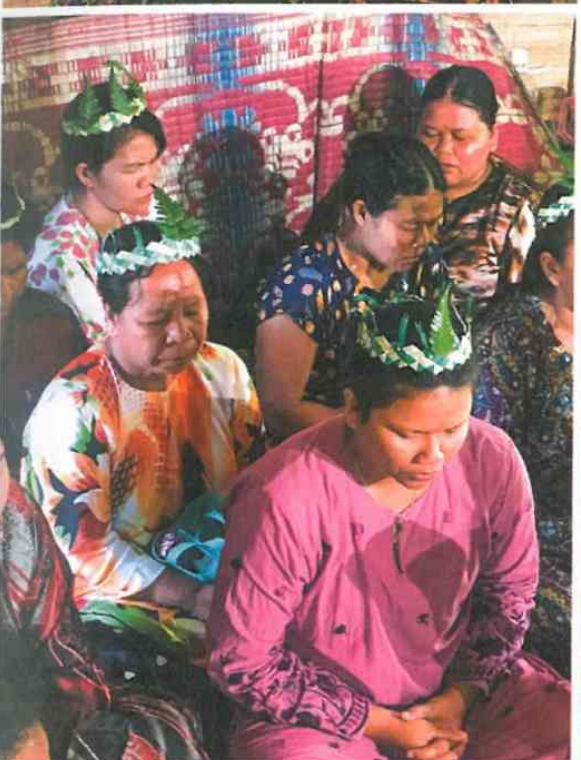
to review their progress in serving their societies.

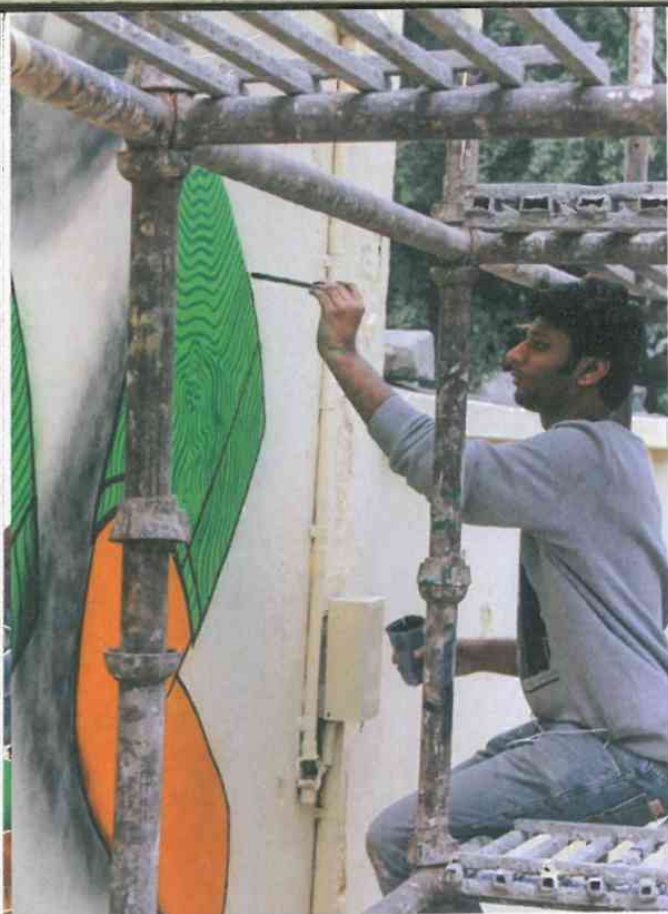
In 2013, the film titled *Frontiers of Learning* presented case studies from four continents where significant progress is being made: the northern Bolívar region in Colombia; Lubumbashi in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; Toronto in Canada; and Bihar Sharif in India.

That same year, a series of short films titled *To Serve Humanity* captured conversations from among the 80,000 young people who attended 114 youth conferences throughout the world, exploring themes central to the process of community building.

A Widening Embrace was produced in 2018 through a creative, grassroots process in which teams of friends documented their own communities' efforts to effect social change. Using footage taken by those teams over the course of a year, the film tells a story of transformation unfolding in 24 communities. Three main themes were explored: universal participation as a path toward collective prosperity, the vital role of young people in the transformation of society, and the emergence of social action initiatives.

Efforts by the Bahá'í International Community to contribute to thinking on issues of global concern also extended to film. The feature *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality* (2021) marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the landmark Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action that resulted from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.





A street artist in India working on a mural for the global Education Is Not a Crime campaign; a documentary about the initiative was released in 2017.

CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES TO EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

One of the remarkable features of the period under review has been a change in the fortunes of the Bahá'ís throughout the Middle East and North Africa, which has opened the way for them to participate more fully in the progress of society and contribute to the common weal. In many ways, this period marked a turning point in this regard.

Although subjected, for half a century, to a state-sponsored program of repression aimed at eradicating the Bahá'í community as a viable entity, the Bahá'ís of Iran have consistently responded in a constructive manner,

and with truthfulness and rectitude of conduct striven to contribute to the betterment of society. In recent years, for the first time, a decisive shift occurred among Iranians in consciousness and attitude toward the Bahá'ís.

This historic shift resulted in an unprecedented level of support for the Bahá'ís. A clearer understanding of their ideals on the part of their fellow citizens and the Iranian diaspora resulted in numerous Iranians—among them intellectuals, journalists, activists, artists, and, remarkably, prominent clerics—arising in their defense, often at great risk to the safety of those who spoke up. Indeed, the situation of the Bahá'ís in Iran came to be understood by many Iranians as a litmus test of the condition of that society and its ability to safeguard the rights of every citizen.

Perhaps one of the most striking indications of this shift in consciousness and attitude toward the Bahá'ís of Iran could be seen in the arena of film. The internationally acclaimed, award-winning director Mohsen Makhmalbaf created *The Gardener* (2012), filmed in the Bahá'í gardens in the Holy Land. Premiered at the Busan International Film Festival in Korea, the film won Best Documentary at the Beirut International Film Festival. *Bahá'ís in Iran*, by journalist Kasra Naji, was first broadcast on BBC Persian television in June 2010. *Iranian Taboo* (2012), a feature film by the Dutch-Iranian filmmaker Reza Allamehzadeh, highlighted efforts that the Iranian Bahá'í community has made to educate its

own young members who are barred from higher education. *To Light a Candle* (2014), a film by journalist Maziar Bahari, also told the story of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Bahari's subsequent documentary, *Changing the World, One Wall at a Time* (2017), presented the Education Is Not A Crime project—one of the world's largest street art and human rights campaigns, which raised awareness of education discrimination against tens of thousands of Bahá'ís.

Concurrent with the increasing awareness among academics and activists, including Iranians, of the vast scope of the persecution against the Bahá'ís was the creation of the Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran.

Launched in 2018 by the Bahá'í International Community, the website houses a collection of almost 10,000 documents providing evidence of the depth and breadth of the decades-long, unrelenting oppression of the Bahá'ís of Iran. Another significant development was the launch of a dedicated website in Persian and a family of associated sites that contribute to the numerous discourses pertaining to Iranian society, an expression of the Bahá'ís' love for their homeland, their resilience, and their dedication to the advancement of their nation and its people.

Countless events and campaigns were organized around the world to draw attention to the persecution of



The Archives of Bahá'í Persecution in Iran, launched in 2018, contains almost 10,000 items of documentary evidence.



The seven Iranian Bahá'ís who were members of an informal national-level group known as the Yárán-i-Írán, which, with the government's knowledge, looked after the spiritual needs of Iran's Bahá'í community. Each served 10 years in prison before being released individually in 2017–2018.

Bahá'ís, particularly after 2008, when five men and two women, who were all members of an informal national-level Bahá'í group known as the Yárán-i-Írán (Friends of Iran) that served the needs of the community's adherents in the absence of any Bahá'í institutions, were each imprisoned for 10 years. The Yárán and their plight came to symbolize the suffering endured, one way or another, by every Bahá'í in Iran.

Similarly, the international press and media reported extensively on attacks directed at BIHE. Founded in the 1980s in response to the Iranian government's campaign to deny Iranian Bahá'ís access to higher education, this extraordinary endeavor in the pursuit of knowledge and social progress has been repeatedly targeted, with homes raided;

computers, books, and course materials confiscated; and professors and administrators imprisoned.

As an indication of the widespread international condemnation of Iran's human rights abuses, including its unconscionable treatment of Bahá'ís, the United Nations General Assembly, every year beginning in 2006, passed a resolution that included specific reference to the Bahá'í community.

In various countries in the Arab world, Bahá'ís have responded to challenges and oppressive measures with a constructive response similar to that demonstrated by the Bahá'ís in Iran.

In Egypt, following the introduction of electronic processing of identity documents, Bahá'ís found themselves unable to obtain identity papers unless they misrepresented their religion. Without such papers, they could not be employed, educated, or treated in



Ayatollah Abdol-Hamid Masoumi-Tehrani, a Muslim cleric in Iran, gifted an illuminated calligraphy of Bahá'u'lláh's writings to the Bahá'ís of the world in April 2014.



Campaigners wearing yellow vests that read “Today we are all Bahá’ís” joined hands around almost 8,000 photographs of the Yárán at a rally on 19 June 2011 at Rio’s Copacabana Beach in Brazil.

hospitals; travel outside of the country; or vote. Following a protracted legal process culminating in a court ruling favorable to the Bahá’ís, on 14 April 2009 the interior minister of Egypt released a decree amending the law to allow Egyptians who are not Muslim, Christian, or Jewish to obtain identification documents that permit a dash to be inserted in place of one of the three recognized religions. However, this change in law has resulted in very few cases of Bahá’ís successfully receiving their identity cards; in most cases, the requests have been denied. The situation of the Bahá’ís in Egypt remains precarious.

In Yemen, the Bahá’í community—thousands in number—became

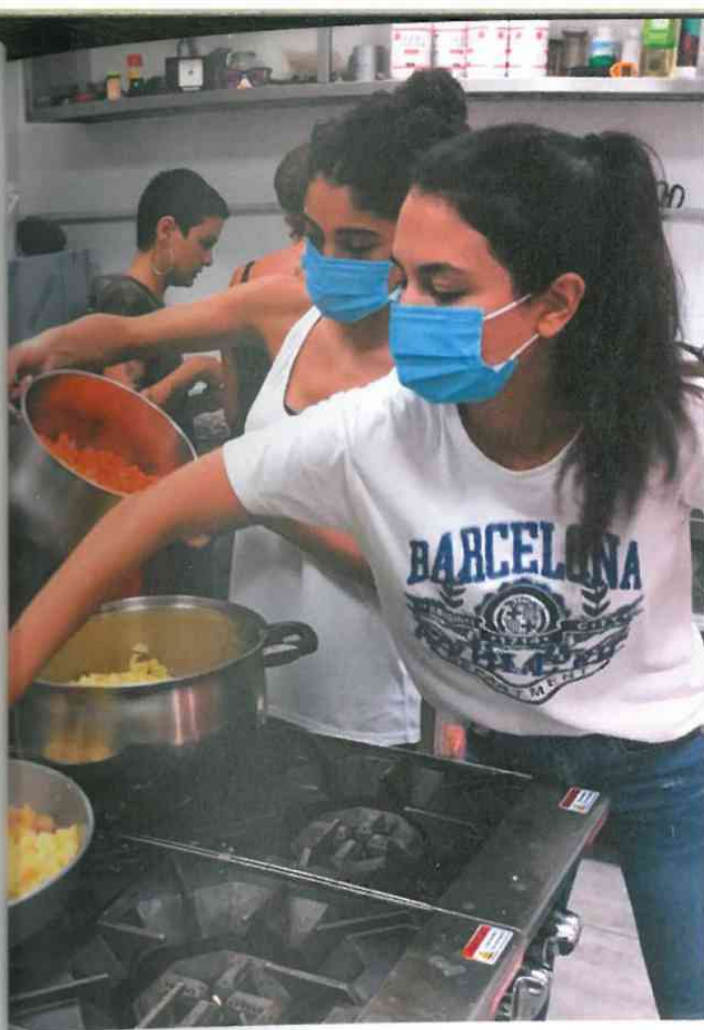
the target of unprecedented persecution after the armed Houthi movement overtook the capital in late 2014. Since 2016, dozens of Yemeni Bahá’ís have been arrested on spurious charges, imprisoned, and denied due process in court proceedings. During raids on Bahá’í homes and nongovernmental organizations, Houthi forces seized property and passports and subsequently pressured relatives and friends to recant their faith. Charges were filed against 20 Bahá’ís in 2018. Following an international outcry, six that were held in detention—one of whom was sentenced to death—were finally released and exiled from the country in 2020. Despite continuing to live under conditions of severe persecution, the

Bahá'ís in Yemen have shown extraordinary resilience. Their widely publicized oppression in Houthi-controlled areas has led Yemenis to take a significantly heightened interest in the Bahá'í teachings for the first time.

Some Bahá'í social initiatives have included a project in Taiz to create educational possibilities for the marginalized Muhamasheen minority and to reconcile warring tribes. These activities have usually been run in coordination with Bahá'í-inspired organizations that focus on building awareness among youth about issues such as peace and reconciliation, social welfare, and community development.

Despite the challenges faced in these countries, the period under review is best characterized as a turning point for Bahá'í communities throughout the region. Whereas at the outset of the period starting in 2006, the Bahá'í Faith was still largely unknown in Arab countries, by the end of the period, in country after country, the Bahá'ís had come to be recognized as significant elements contributing to the

richness of their societies. This profound change was accelerated in 2010 as the social and cultural landscape in the Arab world underwent a transformation. The following year, an open letter from the Bahá'ís of Egypt to their fellow citizens called for a far-reaching consultative process about the fundamental principles on which their country's future should be based. In 2013 and in subsequent years, a number of Bahá'í communities in that region launched websites, marking the first time they had been able to openly present their communities, beliefs, and efforts to their compatriots. This initial emergence from obscurity rapidly led to opportunities for Bahá'ís in a number of countries, such as Bahrain, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan, to participate in the prevalent discourses of their countries. Their contributions, especially related to religious coexistence and societal harmony, have resonated deeply with the aspirations of their compatriots and been greatly appreciated by leaders and thinkers in those societies.



In the days after an explosion rocked Beirut, Lebanon, in August 2020, a group of youth created a volunteer network to coordinate relief activities.

A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Throughout 2020 and 2021, the rapid global spread of the COVID-19 variant of coronavirus resulted in severe social and economic disruption.

As entire countries went into lockdown and educational institutions and public spaces were closed, a series of vivifying messages from the Universal House of Justice provided reassurance to both the Bahá'ís of the world and those engaged with them in activities. These messages expressed profound concern at the situation and deep sympathy for those bereaved and suffering:

However long and arduous the road that must be travelled, we are supremely confident in your fortitude and your determination to see the journey through. You draw from stores of hope, faith, and magnanimity, putting the needs of others before your own, enabling those who are deprived to be spiritually nourished, those who increasingly thirst for answers to be satisfied, and those who long to work for the betterment of the world to be offered the means.²²

As a source of encouragement and guidance, the messages of the House of Justice stimulated the Bahá'ís to direct themselves toward service to their societies. In the first of those messages, on 21 March 2020, the House of Justice noted, “Seldom has it been more evident that society’s collective strength is dependent on the unity it can manifest in action, from the international stage to the grassroots, and we know that you are giving your support to the essential efforts being made in this regard to protect the health and welfare of all.”²³

Even when conditions required curtailing in-person activities, Bahá'ís the world over found it possible to strengthen bonds of friendship and exercise the resilience, tranquility, confidence, and reliance upon God that are characteristics of Bahá'í life. Devotional meetings and opportunities for supportive conversations transitioned into online spaces. Community gatherings—including the Nineteen Day Feast and the annual elections of Local and

National Spiritual Assemblies—continued largely unabated, often using accessible technological tools. The Bahá'í Houses of Worship offered live broadcasts of devotional programs to bring people together across continents, allaying anxiety and inspiring hope.

Many national communities creatively deployed ways to raise awareness of public health requirements. Bahá'ís in Nepal, for example, took early action to keep their fellow citizens informed about preventive health measures. In one township in South Africa, a Bahá'í-inspired clinic created an online network of residents who could offer emotional support to those who were quarantined.

Bahá'í radio stations in several countries acted as sources of critical information and served as anchors of community life: Radyo Bahá'í in the Central Luzon region of the Philippines transmitted messages to remote areas; in Panama a Bahá'í-inspired radio station gave listeners the opportunity to offer support to those in rural areas struggling to access public services; and Chile Bahá'í Radio, based in Labranza, initiated a dialogue with surrounding indigenous communities to ensure that their needs and aspirations were being met.

Special attention was paid to those most at risk from the virus and the economic hardship arising from its



A Bahá'í-inspired community school in Langathel, Manipur, India, distributed schoolwork for parents to carry out with their children during the 2020 pandemic.



Bahá'ís in Nepal took action in March 2020 to update their fellow citizens on preventive health measures.

spread. Local Spiritual Assemblies in various parts of India distributed food and other necessities to citizens whose situation had become precarious. In one village in India, a construction company owned by local Bahá'ís used its trucks and other resources to take food to 2,500 distressed households across 50 remote villages. When in 2020 Cyclone Harold struck the northern islands of Vanuatu, the degree of unity and collective action fostered through the educational activities of the Bahá'í community enabled many people to respond swiftly and to begin rebuilding and replanting. Recognizing that the pandemic would have long-term ramifications, FUNDAEC (Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia, or “Foundation for the Application and Teaching of Science”), a Bahá'í-inspired organization in Colombia, assisted thousands of people to become engaged in more than 1,000 agricultural initiatives.

Furthermore, a sense of extraordinary solidarity was nurtured among people sharing similar circumstances. Nur University in Bolivia ensured that its students were closely engaged through electronic media. The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity created online spaces for young people to come together in focused discussions to examine the efforts of students in higher education to serve society in light of the pandemic. In Canada, a podcast was launched, exploring how insights from religion can bolster resilience and shed new light on the challenges faced by society.

Bahá'í-inspired development organizations in Vanuatu, Nepal, and Colombia adapted to circumstances arising from the health crisis, focusing on relevant and critical issues, such as improving food security and local food production.

In many instances, Bahá'í communities identified constructive themes that emerged from the discourses being opened up in their societies by the pandemic. In Jordan, the Bahá'ís hosted roundtable discussions with journalists about how the media can act as a source of hope. The Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland, in the United States, invited researchers to contribute articles for a series titled “Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic.” The Bahá'í community of Spain spoke with journalists and other social actors about the need to overcome division and polarization in response to crises.

Conversations on topics including

racial and economic disparities, the divisive conceptions of “us” and “them,” and the damaging consequences of a lack of participation in decision-making processes were explored in an online seminar hosted by the Australian Bahá’í Office of External Affairs.

The pandemic also clearly revealed the indispensable role of women leaders as well as the need for models of leadership to be reconceptualized. The contribution of the Bahá’í International Community to the sixty-fifth session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women was a statement titled *Leadership for a Culture of Equality, in Times of Peril and Peace*.

This is but a small sample of the

thousands of efforts made by Bahá’ís to minister to the needs of their communities and compatriots, demonstrating to an even greater degree, “unity and fellow feeling, knowledge and understanding, a spirit of collective worship and common endeavour.”²⁴ In this, they drew hope from the assurance given by the Universal House of Justice: “However difficult matters are at present, and however close to the limits of their endurance some sections of societies are brought, humanity will ultimately pass through this ordeal, and it will emerge on the other side with greater insight and with a deeper appreciation of its inherent oneness and interdependence.”²⁵



A selection of the scores of national Bahá’í websites that have emerged in recent years

BAHÁ'Í PRESENCE ON THE INTERNET

The Bahá'í presence on the internet has greatly expanded in recent years through a network of official sites—international, national, and local.

The international family of websites provides authoritative information about the Faith. A major relaunch of the official website of the worldwide Bahá'í community took place in January 2015, with content arranged under two broad headings: “What Bahá'ís Believe” and “What Bahá'ís Do.” The site is now available in 10 major languages. A significantly revised online Bahá'í Reference Library became the primary repository for Bahá'í sacred literature and now serves as a principal channel for the release of new English translations of the Bahá'í writings.

The Bahá'í World News Service was also redesigned and its media platforms expanded to include video streaming, podcasts, and short-form documentaries. With the launch of the online Bahá'í Media Bank in June 2006, thousands of high-quality photographs and illustrations have been made available. A new website for the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) reflects contributions to prevalent international and regional discourses as well as the BIC's expanded international presence through its several new regional offices.

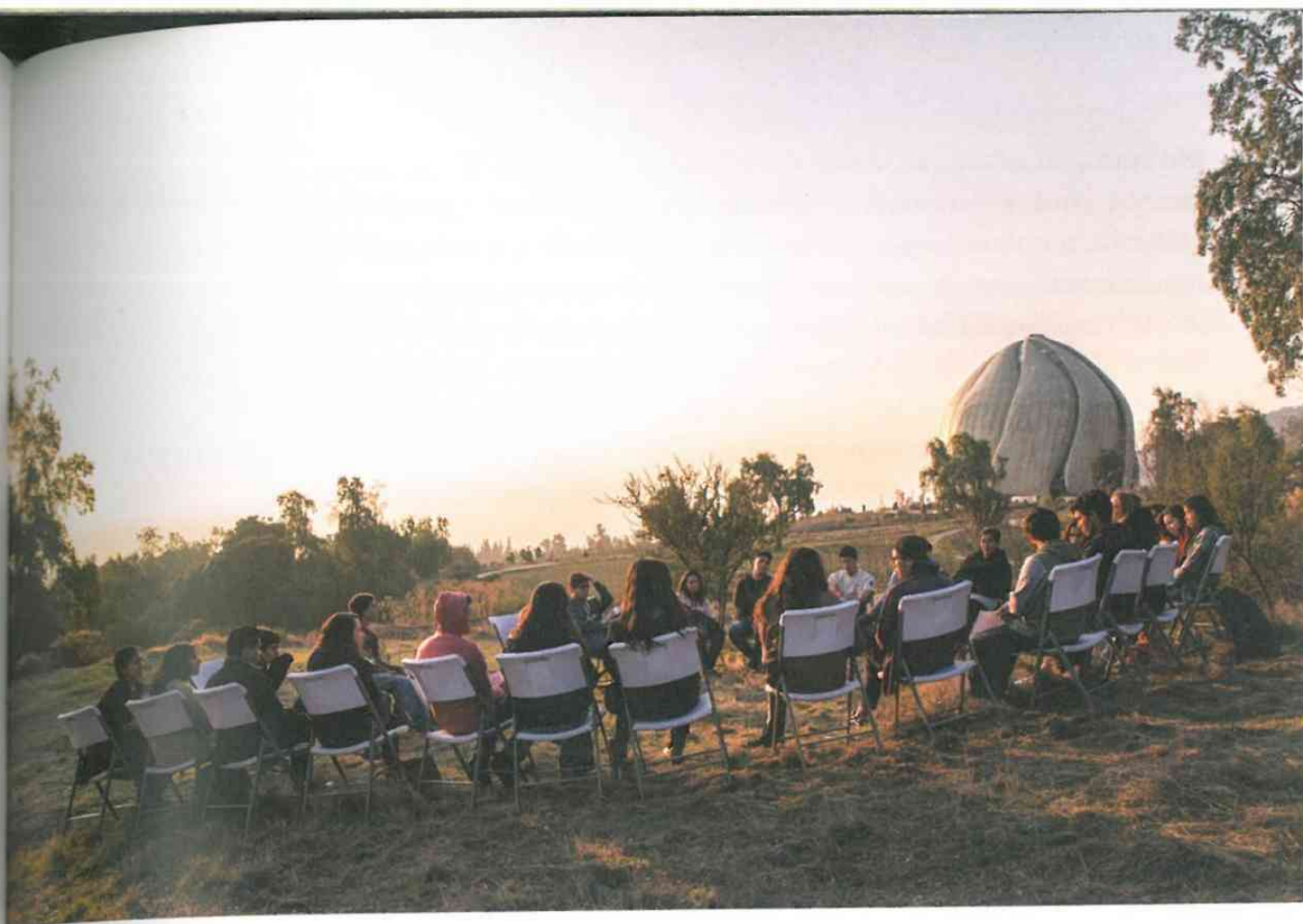
The capacity of national and local Bahá'í communities to articulate their aims and activities through their web presence also expanded greatly. More than 100 new national websites were

launched. In some countries, including in the Arab region, the establishment of national websites signaled the first public presentation of the Bahá'í teachings. During the period of the global COVID-19 pandemic, several national Bahá'í websites provided the public with access to selected Bahá'í teachings that inspire hope in humanity's ability to overcome challenges and serve the common good.

Some national Bahá'í communities launched new sections on their websites, dedicated to the work of their Offices of External Affairs, which featured articles, podcasts, and video blogs exploring prevalent national discourses. In Australia, Chile, and Germany, Offices of External Affairs created microsites on social cohesion, the role of youth in society, and building a prosperous post-pandemic society, respectively.

In 2019, the *Bahá'í World* website launched, making available a selection of essays and long-form articles that convey advances in Bahá'í thought and action and reflect the Faith's purpose in the world.

Two international websites for the bicentenaries of the births of Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb connected the world by capturing glimpses of celebrations. The sites featured photographs, news, artistic works, and live streams from Bahá'í Houses of Worship, a testament to the ways in which Bahá'ís and many of their compatriots throughout the world—from major urban centers to remote rural locations—commemorated these historic moments.



Fostering a Worldwide Movement of Youth

Every society wishes for the well-being of its younger generations and is challenged to provide the knowledge, wisdom, and support necessary for youth to navigate the world they inherit, and to live meaningful lives of accomplishment.

Despite the extraordinary advancements made over the last decades, youth everywhere face an unprecedented constellation of social forces. The convergence of these forces has resulted in a bewildering landscape: the accelerating threat of climate change and its catastrophic consequences; the enervating effects of extreme materialism; the rise in youth radicalization; mass migrations of young people fleeing insecurity and war or seeking economic opportunity, often under harrowing and heartbreaking conditions; the depletion of the youth population in certain societies; the high rates of unemployment and poverty; the normalization and legalization of drug use and the rise in substance abuse and addiction; the proliferation and easy accessibility of pornography online and the impact on sexual violence and the degradation of the human being, especially women and girls; a mental health crisis affecting

the young in many countries; the sophisticated networks of underground slavery that exploit vulnerable populations for economic gain; the numbness engendered by violence in the media; and the nascent and poorly understood effects of social media, virtual worlds, and artificial intelligence—these are but a sample of the phenomena that those growing up today must, in one form or another, navigate.

Under no illusion about the state of the world, the Bahá'í community has sought to create environments that can nurture and support youth from every background, through the various stages of their lives, and can aid them to contribute to the betterment of society. Its experience has confirmed that in youth lie the seeds of profound social transformation. In vast numbers of young people, the Bahá'í community has encountered a limitless well of optimism and hope and of aspirations for a just and unified world. By 2021, a dynamic, growing movement of youth was emerging to take its place at the forefront of social change—youth who “have no ambition except to revive the world, to ennoble its life, and regenerate its peoples.”¹

The following is a brief review of some current programs aimed at the spiritual and intellectual empowerment of young people—Bahá'ís and those who are increasingly drawn to the vision in the Bahá'í teachings of a more just and unified world. While such efforts are modest and nascent, they offer a glimmer of real hope for the future and are explored here in that spirit.

COURSES OF THE TRAINING INSTITUTE

With the establishment of the institute process, and its refinement over many years of experience, the Bahá'í community has developed a powerful means by which to imbue young people with a strong sense of purpose to take ownership of their own spiritual and intellectual growth and to direct their energies towards constructive social transformation. In its approach, the institute process helps young people apply the knowledge they glean through study of sacred writings to their local circumstances, enabling them to take practical steps in applying spiritual principles to the betterment of their communities. Often, youth go through the sequence of courses offered by the training institute together, at times in intensive settings that enable them to progress rapidly and apply what they are learning in acts of service.

Growing numbers of youth have been at the forefront of coordinating community-building efforts in virtually every type of setting. Especially powerful has been the youth's part in nurturing those younger than themselves. With the training provided through the institute process and a system of support and accompaniment, youth have become, in large numbers, the teachers of children's classes and the *animators*, or facilitators, of junior youth groups. The Bahá'í community has begun to witness the potential of youth to create a movement of positive change, albeit still at an early stage, characterized by love and service, and to bring along with them the next generation. Where such an advance at the level of culture has been experienced, the ripple effects on the wider community have been palpable, impacting families and the community in various important ways, including the reduction of destructive behaviors, the empowerment of whole families to contribute to the progress of their community, and the increased value placed in a whole community on knowledge and education.

THE JUNIOR YOUTH SPIRITUAL EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM

In the early stages of the 25-year-long series of plans, as a result of witnessing the idealism and energy of so many young people, the Bahá'í community began to give focused attention to the moral and spiritual development of adolescents through the establishment of a program for the spiritual empowerment of 12- to 15-year-olds, referred to as "junior youth." Targeted by propaganda of all kinds, junior youth can be especially vulnerable to negative influences and destructive peer pressures. Society may view this population as problematic or self-absorbed. However, the experience of the Bahá'í community has demonstrated in junior youth a host of positive characteristics that, through education and an empowering environment, can be cultivated, including altruism, an acute sense of justice, an eagerness to care for the planet, and a desire to understand life's purpose and contribute to creating a better world.

The junior youth spiritual empowerment program emerged out of a learning process of Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired agencies aimed at providing youth with the opportunity to explore themes and concepts and to engage in activities that enable them to have

greater agency in shaping their destiny and contributing meaningfully to social change. The content of the courses explores themes from a Bahá'í perspective, but not in a mode of religious instruction. As the program spread worldwide, it demonstrated an ability to help its participants analyze the constructive and destructive forces operating in society and recognize the influence these forces exert on their thoughts and actions. The program aims to enhance certain important capacities such as spiritual perception, powers of expression, and moral sensibilities. The emerging strong sense of purpose, intertwined with acts of service, unites the fulfillment of individual potential with the advancement of society.

At the time of this writing, the program is being carried out in more than 170 countries. The training course "Releasing the Powers of Junior Youth," which raises up animators of junior youth groups, has been completed by over 154,000 individuals around the world, and over 255,000 junior youth are participating in the program. It is estimated that the number of junior youth who have completed at least one text is some one million.

The considerable demand for the program experienced worldwide has prompted the establishment of a network of sites for the dissemination of learning in all continents, some 60 of which are currently in operation to provide training to coordinators of the program and help systematize and diffuse knowledge accruing in diverse contexts.

The response from society has been noteworthy. "Only the capacity of the Bahá'í community," the Universal House of Justice wrote in 2010, "limits the extent of its response to the demand for the program by schools and civic groups."²

PREPARATION FOR SOCIAL ACTION

Preparation for Social Action (PSA) is one of the educational programs developed in the context of social and economic development efforts inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. The program seeks to raise up individuals of progressively higher proficiency within a region, capable of applying scientific knowledge together with spiritual principles to advance particular processes of community life related, for example, to health, food production and security, education, and the environment.

The program builds the capabilities of participants to become promoters of community well-being. Groups of youth around the world study the PSA curriculum in informal settings over a period of two to three years. As participants advance through the program, they are able to undertake a wide range of initiatives to address the needs of their villages and towns—initiatives that arise out of participants' growing understanding of their social reality.

PSA emerged out of a long-term learning process that began in the late 1970s, when Fundación para la Aplicación y Enseñanza de la Ciencia (FUNDAEC) undertook an action-research initiative in partnership with the population of the Norte del Cauca region in Colombia. The aim was to generate knowledge that would assist the region's rural population, especially its youth, to withstand accelerating forces of social disintegration and the overwhelming drivers of rural-to-urban migration. The aims of the learning process were not only to help young people to find viable ways to stay in their villages and towns, but also to raise their capacity to contribute to the progress and prosperity of their communities.

From the outset, the foundational principles of FUNDAEC's efforts—the principles of the oneness of humanity and of justice—were explicit. It was the conviction of FUNDAEC that participation of rural populations could only meaningfully be achieved if the people themselves were able to choose and walk their own path of development. Such an approach was, at that time, in contrast to many of the prevalent approaches in the development field—approaches that generally involved local populations participating in plans designed by organizations from the outside.

FUNDAEC's educational materials were gradually developed in the context of growing experience on the ground. Given the high academic level of the curriculum, it was eventually accredited as a formal secondary program known as Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial (SAT). One of the remarkable achievements of SAT was that the educational outcomes of those in rural areas were on par with those from urban centers. In fact, SAT participants scored some of the highest marks in their region on state exams. Perhaps more significantly, though, the program enabled its participants to dedicate their new knowledge and skills, and their time and effort, to the development of their own communities. "SAT students learn for life; others learn for exams" became a sentiment associated with the program.

In the early 2000s, in response to a growing interest in the SAT materials by a number of organizations around the world, FUNDAEC revised a portion of the SAT curriculum to create the PSA program. The 25 units that make up the program help participants cultivate capabilities in three categories: moral capabilities, capabilities related to forms of knowledge (the sciences, mathematics, history, and language), and capabilities connected with service to the community. Participants begin learning about and engaging in different processes of community life such as those related to health, food, education, and the environment.

Since its emergence in 2006, PSA has been implemented in some 20 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific, reaching more than 17,000 participants. A number of other countries are taking initial steps to introduce the program.

YOUTH CONFERENCES

With a growing movement of youth on every continent, the Universal House of Justice announced in 2013 plans for 95 youth conferences around the world, with an additional 19 conferences added shortly after to accommodate the large number of young people wishing to participate.

Open to all people between the ages of 15 and 30, the series of conferences catalyzed a global youth movement arising from the impact of the programs of training institutes and other educational initiatives aimed at their spiritual and intellectual development. Over a four-month period, more than 80,000 participants attended. An additional cohort of some 100,000 participated in follow-up gatherings.

The conference program enabled participants to explore such themes as the characteristics inherent to the period of youth, the historical contributions of young people to the transformation of society, the responsibilities of the present generation of youth, the society-building power of the Bahá'í teachings, and the importance of faith and tenacity to a life of service.

The conferences led "to an inclusive and ever-expanding conversation" and a "pattern of action of far-reaching consequence regarding how to live a coherent life and be an agent of spiritual and social transformation."³

THE INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN GLOBAL PROSPERITY

Another important development in the period under review has been the efforts made by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP), an educational and research organization established in 1999. ISGP provides a forum for the exploration of concepts and the analysis of processes that give shape to humanity's search for global peace and prosperity.

Alongside its research initiatives, ISGP offers annual seminars for university students. The seminars seek to "raise the consciousness of youth about the importance of engaging in action and discourse directed towards social change" and to help them "understand and analyze the culture in which they are immersed as well as the content of the university courses they are studying." Ultimately, ISGP has created a program that aids university students to "assume ownership of their education" and "assist them in their efforts to acquire the kind of knowledge that will enable them to live fruitful, productive and meaningful lives."⁴

Encouraged to see in education a more expansive purpose than what is commonly promoted, the students are challenged to think beyond superficial or simplistic conceptions of social change, of science, of religion, and of the purpose of education itself. In addition, students explore how the spiritual and material dimensions of life reinforce each other, especially at such an important juncture of their lives as they choose their professions and determine a path for their future. Throughout the four years of study, youth also review different aspects of the efforts undertaken by the Bahá'í community, explore some of the fundamental concepts and principles that sustain its work, and reflect on ways to raise their own capacity to contribute at higher and higher levels of sophistication and effectiveness to the betterment of humanity.

In 2006, 30 participants attended the very first ISGP seminar for undergraduate students, which was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The seminars have since been extended to more than 50 units, serving over 100 countries in Africa, the Arab region, Australasia, Europe, Latin America, North America, and South and Southeast Asia. To date some 8,000 youth have participated in at least the first year of the program and around 1,700 have completed all four years. In 2008, ISGP also began to offer a seminar for graduates and young professionals, which has now

extended to five regions: Australasia, Europe, North America, Latin America, and South and Southeast Asia—and over 1,500 individuals have attended.

YOUTH IN THE VANGUARD

When viewed together, the educational programs highlighted here—the training institute, the junior youth spiritual empowerment program, Preparation for Social Action, and the seminars offered by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity—all seek to foster the spiritual and intellectual capacities of young people. These include, for instance, the capacities to independently investigate reality, to consult with others in seeking a more well-rounded and precise understanding of the world around them, to think clearly and in a nuanced manner, to develop their powers of expression, and to work together in efforts aimed at the progress of their communities. These capacities, and many others developed through participation in the programs described, underpin a host of other initiatives to support the academic success of young people and to fix their footsteps firmly on a path of productive work and of service to humanity.

In the years ahead it is anticipated that, against a backdrop of turbulence and social unrest in societies throughout the world, these educational programs will assist youth to navigate the critical years of their lives and to channel their aspirations for a better world into meaningful action. The Universal House of Justice, ever confident in the potentialities of youth to build the world anew, looks to them “to expand the horizons of what the Bahá’í community can accomplish.”⁵

Women and Social Progress

Building Communities Based on Dynamic Partnership

ANN BOYLES

The equality of women and men is a spiritual reality asserted by Bahá'u'lláh and a pillar of Bahá'í belief, as evidenced by many statements in the Bahá'í writings. This spiritual reality, Bahá'ís believe, must be manifested today in its fullness in social reality.

Equality is an indispensable element for the progress of humanity, a principle which requires that women and men move forward together in dynamic partnership. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated that "As long as women are prevented from attaining their highest possibilities, so long will men be unable to achieve the greatness which might be theirs."¹ Reiterating the principle in a statement to the United Nations in 2015, the Bahá'í International Community described the equality of women and men as "a facet of human reality" and asserted, "That which makes human beings human—their inherent dignity and nobility—is neither male nor female. The search for meaning, for purpose, for community; the capacity to love, to create, to persevere, has no gender," concluding that "Such an assertion has profound implications for the organization of every aspect of human society."²

The Bahá'í community has, as a matter of faith, pursued the application of this principle over the entire span of the Faith's history, basing its actions on Bahá'u'lláh's statement "Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, through His consummate favours and all-encompassing mercy, hath conferred upon all a station and rank of the same plane"³—an assertion that was reinforced and

elaborated upon in many statements and writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as the following: "... in the sight of Bahá, women are accounted the same as men, and God hath created all humankind in His own image, and after His own likeness. That is, men and women alike are the revealers of His names and attributes, and from the spiritual viewpoint there is no difference between them."⁴ In their efforts to realize this vision, Bahá'í individuals, institutions, and communities around the world have striven to understand more deeply its implications and have engaged in discourses and actions to promote gender equality ranging from grassroots initiatives to contributions at international fora.⁵

Since the Bahá'í writings emphasize both the importance of women as equal partners in the advancement of civilization and the key role of mothers as the first educators of the next generation, it was natural that the earliest endeavors in Persia focused on encouraging families to provide for the education of their girl children and on establishing schools for girls. Throughout the past century and a half, the geographical scope and range of activities related to gender equality have both broadened, and over the past 25 years, in particular, the training and community-building endeavors in which Bahá'ís in all parts of the globe are engaged have given further momentum to, and provided additional settings for, the practical expression of this principle.

DEVELOPING WOMEN'S CAPACITIES AT THE GRASSROOTS

The Bahá'í community recognizes that, while tremendous efforts in the areas of policy have been made at the international level by organizations such as the United Nations, the advancement of women cannot be brought about or sustained merely through legislation or policy directives that give women additional power within existing, unbalanced structures and systems. And even if attempts to change those social structures are made, such changes will not be sufficient to create conditions that allow women and girls to develop fully; unhealthy values may continue to be held by men and women, as well as boys and girls, sustaining exploitative behaviors.⁶ To effect the profound changes needed, educational processes that help to develop spiritual as well as intellectual capacities, that uphold the oneness of humanity, and that promote the



Women play a key role in community banking in Mongolia.

equality of women and men play a pivotal role in establishing patterns of relationships that meet the needs of this age.⁷

At the most basic level, the home is the nurturing ground of values such as truth or dishonesty, justice or injustice, kindness or violence. And from the home, behaviors rooted in these values radiate through society. For example, when boys are allowed to dominate their sisters within the family, what deters them from doing the same at their school or place of work—or even in national or international arenas? If, instead, sons and daughters are raised so that both participate in household duties and both participate in decision-making, these are the habits they will take out into the world as they grow to adulthood.⁸ Efforts to nurture values that promote gender equality at the roots of community life are clearly key to change.

The purpose of the institute process which the Bahá'í community has been developing since 1996 (see “A New Institution of Learning,” in this volume) is to develop capacities in participants—women and men, boys and girls—to contribute to the spiritual and material advancement of their societies. The first quotation in the first book of the curriculum invites them to reflect on a statement of Bahá'u'lláh regarding their role as individuals: “The betterment

of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct.”⁹ The materials train participants to engage in behavior and facilitate activities that contribute directly to the advancement of the communities in which they live. Beyond the basic activities, participants acquire knowledge, skills and insights that equip them to participate in the discourses prevalent in their society and to engage in social action endeavors. Women have been at the heart of all these efforts. What is especially remarkable is that, in the aggregate, despite the vast inequalities between women and men in most societies, globally, women comprise half of those who have completed the first sequence of courses of the training institute—and in all except the first book, women outnumber men. This is also more dramatically the case in the higher sequence of courses where the ratio of women to men is around 60 percent. These remarkable statistics reflect the emphasis that the worldwide Bahá’í community places on the equality of women and men and the essential part that women play in social transformation.

The percentage of women engaged in the educational processes of the institute reveals the central role they have played in promoting it in their own communities and in its dissemination to other parts



Women in Lundu, Sarawak, participate in a study circle.



Professor Hoda Mahmoudi, Bahá'í Chair for World Peace at the University of Maryland

of the world. Many of those who complete institute courses continue on to serve as tutors, teachers of children's classes, and animators in the junior youth spiritual empowerment program. One example illustrating the level of female empowerment that has been achieved originates in the Central African Republic: In 2014, while only 20 percent of primary teachers in the national educational system were women, the percentage of primary teachers in community schools raised up through the training institute was 55 percent—rising to 60 percent in rural areas. Around the world, the level of women's participation as animators and coordinators in the junior youth program is comparable. Such a level of engagement is a strong indicator of the effectiveness of the training institute in the enfranchisement of women and girls.

Specific attention is given to identifying, training, and accompanying women in their efforts, including practical actions related to program delivery. These include the decentralization of training seminars to allow women to participate close to home and the provision of childcare to mothers. Furthermore, the training institute materials themselves, as well as those developed for the junior youth spiritual empowerment program and other Bahá'í-inspired education programs, such as the Preparation for Social Action and community schools programs, all promote the principle of gender equality, whether explicitly or implicitly. For example,



In study circles around the world, as shown in London, United Kingdom, the sharing of insights by every participant is encouraged and valued.

of the nine texts developed for the junior youth program by 2017, seven mention the equality of women, the advancement of women, or the education of girls, while more than half of the units in the Preparation for Social Action program make explicit reference to the theme.

Assisting women to develop capacities through collaborative study, action, and reflection helps change culture by breaking down prejudices of sex and gender. Experience with community schools in Africa and Asia has shown that those starting with female teachers are more sustainable over the first few years than those starting with men. Women have been better able to persevere through this unstable period with little remuneration, while pressure on men to provide for their families makes it difficult for them to sacrifice to that level. Beyond the obvious benefits of sustainable educational opportunities, village councils are now beginning to appoint women teachers to serve on community development and administrative committees—positions that were previously filled only by men.

Clearly, when women and men and boys and girls all become advocates for gender equality, everyone benefits. Sometimes the steps towards such change are dramatic, and sometimes they are

incremental. For example, the holding of gatherings to join with others in prayer may seem like a simple activity, but in a village in India, these gatherings have provided rare community acceptance for women to leave their houses. As a result, the “long-standing system requiring women to seclude and isolate themselves is starting to give way” as participants realize that long-established customs are less important than educating children, consulting with each other to solve problems together—and allowing women to participate in community activities.¹⁰

The proliferation of such efforts worldwide is helping to advance the creation of social environments and structures capable of meeting the needs of this age. Challenges such as social inequities, climate change, and global health emergencies, to mention a few, show in starker and starker relief the inadequacy of current outmoded customs and systems to deal with them. Advancing the role of women will undoubtedly serve to better equip humanity to address the ordeals it faces. As the Bahá’í International Community stated in 2021:

Against the backdrop of a world undergoing profound change, there is a growing recognition of the indispensable role that women



An experimental agricultural plot at the University Center for Rural Well-Being in Jamundi-Robles, Colombia

in leadership play. In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, nations in which women contributed more prominently to the leadership of society were seen to have generated a degree of stability across a variety of short-term indicators, including public health and economic security. At the community level, women continue to play an indispensable role—and often lead—in caring for the sick, educating the young, tending to the needy, and sustaining the social and economic fabric more broadly. Never has it been more clear how much humanity benefits when women's leadership is embraced and promoted at every level of society, whether in the family or the village, the community or local government, the corporation or the nation.¹¹

With regard to the issue of climate change, while it is true that women are greatly impacted by its negative effects on the natural environments from which they earn their living in many parts of the world, they are also equipped to respond to it. Experience is proving that participation in the institute courses has provided women with skills to deal with this issue at the grassroots level. For example, when a major cyclone hit Dili, in Timor-Leste, and cut off external assistance, participants in the training institute courses used the skills and networks they had formed through their collaborative study to assist more than 7,000 people across 13 villages and neighborhoods with access to food and other essentials. And in



Eight members of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Belize cast their votes in the election of the Universal House of Justice.



Bani Dugal, Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations; Mary Power, former Director of the BIC Office for the Advancement of Women; and Representative Saphira Rameshfa

Okcheay, Cambodia, a tree-planting project that had been devised by youth participants protected roads in the area from soil erosion when severe flooding occurred several years later.

While difficult to live through, unstable periods provide humanity with opportunities to examine our collective values. Women, the Bahá'í writings assert, must have their rightful place as equals to men in every sphere of human endeavor, contributing at every level of decision making and bringing their capacities to bear on the fortunes of their communities, societies, and all of humankind.

DEVELOPING CAPACITIES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MEMBERSHIP

At the global level, experience has shown that increased emphasis on the education of women and girls results in a corresponding rise in the level of their participation in public life and community affairs.¹² Likewise, the Bahá'í community has witnessed, as a result of its efforts to develop the capacities of participants through its worldwide training institute process, a substantial increase in the

membership of women on institutions within the Bahá'í community and their shouldering of administrative responsibilities.

The administrative order of the Bahá'í world community is composed of both elected and appointed arms. As of 20 April 2021, some 42 percent of those elected to serve on the 174 National Spiritual Assemblies around the world were women, rising from about 30 percent in 1994–95. The ratio of women serving as office-bearers rose to 35 percent, compared to 19 percent in 1983, and some 53 percent of those serving as the principal executive officer (titled “National Secretary”) were women. Membership of women on Regional Bahá'í Councils was about 46 percent. When considered in the global context of women's representation in governing institutions, such a high percentage of membership is impressive. These figures are worldwide results, including numerous societies where equality may not yet be accepted even in principle. They indicate a growing embrace of the spiritual principle of gender equality by the men and women who elect their institutions through secret ballot as well as confidence in women's administrative capacities.

On the appointed institutions, the percentage of women members is even higher—an indication of the attention given to



The education of girls is central to all Bahá'í initiatives, as shown in Mongolia.

identifying women of capacity and enlisting them to serve. As of April 2020, of the nine members comprising the International Teaching Centre, 56 percent were women, rising from 29 percent in 1973, when it was established. Of the 90 members of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 47 percent were women (up from 19 percent in 1968 when the Continental Boards were created, and 52 percent of the 1,059 members of the Auxiliary Boards around the world were women.¹³

While there are variations among the continents in the percentage of women members, particularly on the elected institutions, the steady move towards more gender-balanced membership indicates an increased understanding of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement "Not until the world of women becomes equal to the world of men in the acquisition of virtues and perfections, can success and prosperity be attained as they ought to be."¹⁴

ON THE INTERNATIONAL FRONT: PARTICIPATION IN DISCOURSES AT THE UNITED NATIONS

At the international level, the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) has advocated for the equality of women and men since the inception of the United Nations, making its first statement on gender equality in 1947. Shortly after it became an accredited non-governmental organization (NGO) in 1970, it began to advocate for the girl child. In 1974, as an NGO member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the BIC made a statement to the twenty-fifth Session of the Commission that recommended greater emphasis on the importance of educating girls. With regard to this topic, the Bahá'í International Community was ahead of its time. Over the decades, as the UN gave greater attention to the issue of the girl child and many other international organizations focused on it as a strategy for development, the BIC has continued to advocate for girls' education and has made numerous official statements about it. The BIC has also collaborated with other NGOs and entities such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and continues to serve on UNICEF's NGO Working Group on Girls. The BIC was also one of the earliest proponents at the United Nations of the idea that men and boys play an important role in promoting gender equality, particularly that their

full development depends upon the advancement of women, since a society based on gender equality serves the interests of both women and men.¹⁵

In its statements and in discourses at the United Nations, the BIC has addressed topics as diverse as gender and leadership, violence against women and girls, the climate crisis as a catalyst for nurturing a more gender-balanced culture, the role of women as well as men in establishing a flourishing world civilization, transforming the structures of society, and religion and gender equality.

On this last theme, while acknowledging that religion has often been seen as a negative force, the Bahá'í International Community has urged the open examination of religion as "a basis for social and political mobilization" and has advocated for a discourse centered around three themes: the role of religious leaders in supporting gender equality, the role of men and boys in demonstrating "new understandings of masculinity," and religious interpretations that discriminate against women and thus serve as an impediment to peace.¹⁶

While it has always related its contributions to UN discussions on gender equality to spiritual principle, by 2008, the BIC began to draw as well on the rich experience of the Bahá'í community to contribute to the advancement of civilization. The film *Glimpses into the Spirit of Gender Equality*, produced on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing conference, combines footage from the United Nations, tracing the BIC's efforts to advocate for the education of girls and for gender equality, with stories from the grassroots.¹⁷ It showcases the experiences and initiatives of individuals, families, community members, and village leaders in Colombia, India, Malaysia, the United States, and Zambia, to illustrate how even small steps can contribute to change in a culture. The film offers insights gleaned from efforts made over the past 25 years to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings regarding equality in different communities and settings. It conveys how the lessons being learned at the grassroots reinforce efforts being made in international fora for the advancement of women, providing a view of what has been learned thus far about building a civilization that values and nurtures both material and spiritual qualities in all its members.

CONCLUSION

In the long process of building a global civilization, sustained and coordinated action to establish gender equality is vital. While the Bahá'í community can take stock of its progress in this regard and the insights it has gleaned over almost 200 years in a growing variety of settings, the work is far from done. Efforts to nurture strong, vibrant communities in which women and men strive in dynamic partnership to build an equitable society must be extended and deepened.¹⁸ In this work, the community derives its vision and its impetus from statements such as the following, made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912, during His travels in North America: "... until woman and man recognize and realize equality, social and political progress here or anywhere will not be possible. For the world of humanity consists of two parts or members: one is woman; the other is man. Until these two members are equal in strength, the oneness of humanity cannot be established, and the happiness and felicity of mankind will not be a reality."¹⁹